

VZCZCXRO6110
PP RUEHAG RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV
DE RUEHLB #0216/01 0431712
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 121712Z FEB 08
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0981
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 2215
RHMFISS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000216

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/YERGER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/10/2018

TAGS: [IS](#) [KIRF](#) [KPAL](#) [LE](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: AMBASSADOR VISITS SENIOR MUSLIM RELIGIOUS
LEADERS

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i. Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) The Ambassador's introductory calls on Acting Head of the Higher Islamic Shia Council Sayyed Qabalan and Sunni Grand Mufti Sheikh Qabbani were a contrast illustrating the opposing political visions and the tensions underlying Shia-Sunni relations in Lebanon. Sayyed Qabalan, a close ally of Amal Movement leader Nabih Berri, preached the need for the U.S. to engage evenhandedly with all political forces, including Hizballah and Amal. He believes that favoring the majority over the opposition (which includes Hizballah and Amal) is not in Lebanon's interests and insisted that Lebanon had nothing to fear from Syria and Iran. Qabalan further believes that the key to solving the region's problems, including emigration, is the elimination of Israeli "aggression" and a just resolution to the Palestinian issue.

2. (C) Sunni Grand Mufti Sheikh Qabbani, a close ally of March 14 leader Saad Hariri, stressed that the opposition, backed by Iranian and Syrian financial and moral support, is undermining Lebanon's democracy and maintained that Hizballah and Iran are scheming to control not only Lebanon, but the entire Islamic world. Qabbani praised U.S. support for Lebanon's democratic institutions and stressed the need for March 14 to maintain its majority in the 2009 parliamentary elections. End Summary.

U.S. BIAS EXACERBATES LEBANON'S, REGION'S PROBLEMS

3. (C) In a February 11 meeting with the Ambassador, Poloff, and Senior LES Political Advisor, Acting Head of the Higher Shia Islamic Council Sayyed Abdel Amir Qabalan stressed the positive role the U.S. could play in Lebanon, if it would only engage with all of Lebanon's political forces, and not take sides with the majority against the opposition. Qabalan called for partnership and unity, noting that Lebanon was a country of peace and harmony, not violence and terrorism. Qabalan claimed that Lebanon's problems did not stem from Syria, Iran, or the opposition, but from the majority's (and the U.S.'s) refusal to engage with everyone and build "bridges of cooperation" in the interests of Lebanon.

4. (C) When asked about conditions in south Lebanon, and in particular what motivates many Lebanese to emigrate, Qabalan pointed out that economics was not the main reason for

Lebanese leaving their country. Rather, lack of hope and fear (of Israeli attacks) convinced many, especially young, Lebanese to leave.

¶5. (C) Qabalan cited the Palestinian issue as the root of most of the region's problems. Characterizing the U.S. as the "ruler of the world," he urged the U.S. to give the Palestinians their rights because the weak deserve their rights, even if the powerful do not agree with their position.

OPPOSITION AIMING TO UNDERMINE DEMOCRACY

¶6. (C) Sunni Grand Mufti Sheikh Mohamad Rashid Qabbani was effusive in his praise for U.S. support for Lebanon's democracy in these challenging times. Qabbani, a close ally of March 14 leader Saad Hariri, cited the opposition's proclivity for street violence and its preventing the convening of parliament as part of their insidious campaign to undermine Lebanon's democratic institutions. Qabbani believes the opposition wants to confiscate Lebanon for the benefit of Syria and Iran and cited a 1989 statement by Hizballah SYG Nasrallah and Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei exhorting the Lebanese to revolt if the Taif Agreement is implemented. According to Qabbani, Hizballah wants to achieve Shia political domination of Lebanon by scrapping Taif's 50-50 division of power between Christians and Muslims and replacing it with a division by thirds (one third Shia, one third Sunni, and one third Christian). Qabbani further noted that Hizballah seeks to achieve Shia domination by increasing the Shia birthrate.

HOW TO COUNTER OPPOSITION SCHEMING

BEIRUT 00000216 002 OF 002

¶7. (C) Noting that Lebanon's Sunni are overwhelmingly March 14 supporters, Qabbani said the government should immediately approve the constitutional amendment to elect General Michel Sleiman. Thanking the U.S. for its support of Lebanese democracy and stability, Qabbani deplored opposition allegations that the government was acting on U.S. orders. He personally believes the majority should go ahead and elect Sleiman by a simple majority, as that would be better than the political vacuum. However, he does not think the majority will venture to do this, unless the opposition instigates chaos in the country.

¶8. (C) Qabbani plans to impress on Hariri and March 14 that it is imperative for them to get at least 70 percent majority in the 2009 parliamentary elections. Qabalan noted that whatever Saad Hariri spends on the election, Iran will spend millions more, adding that the opposition often unjustly attacked Hariri's charitable and social service programs as vote-buying. He noted that Hariri and the majority contributed openly, while the opposition's allies Iran and Syria spent millions secretly.

SISON